

# Islam and the Jews: Myth, Counter-Myth, History

Mark R. Cohen

**You** know, **my** brethren, **that on account of our sins God** has cast us into the midst of this people, the nation of Ishmael, who persecutes us severely, and who devises ways to harm **us and** to debase us... No nation **has ever** done **more** harm to Israel. None has been able to reduce us as they have.

Thus wrote **Maimonides** to the persecuted Jews of Yemen late in the twelfth century. In recent years the issue addressed by him has aroused **new** and impassioned interest - indeed, a highly politicized debate, in books, articles, and public **forums**, on the question: **How did** the **Jews** fare under Islamic **rule in** the Middle Ages? Were they treated better than their brethren in Europe, or was their situation perhaps similar to, if not, as Maimonides suggests, worse than, that of the persecuted Jews of Christendom?

Two radically divergent answers to this question have been offered. One is the well-known thesis - or rather, *myth* - of the Jewish-Islamic interfaith **utopia**, a 'golden age' of toleration, of political achievement, and of remarkably integrated cultural efflorescence. **This myth was invented by nineteenth-century European Jewish intellectuals** frustrated by the tortuously slow **progress** of their own integration into gentile society in the age of emancipation; it went hand-in-hand with the so-called 'lachrymose conception' of European **Jewish** history, according to which Jewish life in medieval Christian Europe was one long chain of

**Mark R. Cohen** teaches Jewish History at Princeton University. A longer **version of this essay, with extensive annotations, will be published in The Solomon Goldman Lectures**, volume 4, by The Spertus College of **Judaica Press**.

[*The Jerusalem Quarterly*, Number Thirty-Eight, 1986]

Originally promulgated by Jewish writers, the myth of Judeo-Islamic harmony (contrasted with Judeo-Christian conflict) has in our own time been appropriated by Arabs and by Western sympathizers with the Arab struggle against Israel, who attempt, through the use of history, to explain and in fact justify modern Arab anti-Zionism and anti-Semitism. They argue, explicitly or implicitly, that the current disharmony between Jews and Arabs is not to be attributed to any long-standing Arab or Islamic anti-Semitism. Rather, as Jewish historians themselves have claimed, Jews and Arabs lived in peace and friendship for centuries; therefore, the source of modern Arab antipathy towards Israel is the Jews themselves, who destroyed the old harmony when they began to threaten Muslim-Arab rights to the land of Palestine.

An early example of this adoption of the Jewish myth of the interfaith Utopia can be found in George Antonius' book, *The Arab A Wakening*. Among more recent publications are Ibrahim Amin Ghali's *Le monde arabe et les juifs*,<sup>2</sup> and, in Arabic, Oāsim 'Abduh Oāsim's *al-yahūd fī Miṣr mundh al-fath al-islāmī hattā al-ghazw al-'uthmānī* (The Jews of Egypt from the Islamic Conquest to the Ottoman Invasion),<sup>3</sup> as well as the paper given by Said Abdel Fattah Ashour at the Fourth Conference of the Academy of Islamic Research at al-Azhar University in Cairo in September, 1968. (Entitled 'al-yahūd fī l-'usūr al-wustā: dirasa muqarina bayn al-sharq wa-l-gharb', it was published both in the Arabic original<sup>4</sup> and in the official English translation of the conference proceedings<sup>5</sup> under the title, *Jews in the Middle Ages: Comparative Study of East and West*.)

Dismayed by contemporary Arab exploitation of the myth of the interfaith Utopia in the service of the cause against Israel, some Jewish writers have, lamentably, invented a 'counter-myth' to take its place. Echoing and often citing Maimonides' dark view of Islamic treatment of the Jews, these writers indict Islam as congenitally and relentlessly persecutory. And, by transposing the theory of Jewish suffering from Christendom to Islam, they have created what we may call the 'neo-lachrymose' conception of the Jewish past.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> New York: Capricorn Books, 1965, especially pp. 391-392, 410 (originally published 1946)

<sup>2</sup> Paris: Editions Cujas, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Beirut: al-Madrasa al-'Arabiyyali l-Dirāsāt wa-'l-Nashr, 1980.

\* Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Madani, n.d., II, pp. 349-361.

<sup>5</sup> Cairo: General Organization for Government Printing Office, 1970, pp. 497-505.

<sup>6</sup> Some examples: Saul S. Friedlander, 'The Myth of Arab Toleration', *Midstream* 16, no. 1 (January, 1970), pp. 56-59; Maurice M. Roumani in collaboration with Deborah Goldman and Helene Korn, 'The Persecution of Jews in Arab Lands', in *The Case of the Jews from Arab Countries. A Neglected Issue*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries, 1975), pp. 41-57; Martin Gilbert, *The Jews of Arab Lands: Their History in Maps* (London: Farnival Press, 1975); Rose Lewis, 'Muslim Grandeur and the Spanish

One well known promulgator of this revisionist trend suffered personal humiliation when she was expelled along with other Jews from Egypt in 1956. Writing under the pseudonym Bat Ye'or, 'Daughter of the Nile', **she** has published several pamphlets and books sounding the theme of congenital and unremitting **Arab-Islamic persecution of the non-Muslim religions**. Her French book on the subject **has** just appeared **in** an expanded English version called *The Dhimmi: Jews and Christians Under Islam* <sup>7</sup> **and** it constitutes a classic example of this revisionist trend. Another is journalist Joan Peters' recently published *From Time Immemorial: The Origins of the Arab-Jewish Conflict over Palestine* .<sup>8</sup> This work has gained considerable notoriety for its provocative assault **upon** the historical argument **defending** Arab claims to the land of Palestine. In her introductory chapters Peters presents a litany of instances of **anti-Jewish** persecution in the **pre-modern** Islamic world, arguing overtly against Arab rhetoric espousing the myth of the interfaith Utopia as well as against the view, shared by many Jewish and **non-Jewish** writers alike, 'that the Jews were, during certain periods in the Arab lands, "better off than they were in Christian lands of Europe'.

While **the** myth of the interfaith **utopia** was certainly in need of correction, the counter-myth, with its implicit transvaluation of the older conception of the relative status of the **Jews** of the West **and** the East, **does** not represent a **fairer** reading of the past. A more balanced approach, such as that taken by Bernard Lewis in his recent book, *The Jews of Islam*,<sup>9</sup> or by Norman Stillman in the historical introduction to his source book, *The Jews of Arab Lands* ,<sup>10</sup> is badly needed. That is because, as any careful and systematic reading of the historical sources **shows**, despite the theological intolerance that Islam shared with Christendom, the **Jews** of Islam experienced far greater security and far more integration with the majority society than their brethren in Europe. During the first six centuries of Islam, the period embracing the so-called "Golden Age" that has been the focus of attention by proponents of both the old myth and the new counter-myth, the incidence of violent persecution, with great **loss** of life, was comparatively **low**. The discriminatory restrictions of the **so-called** Pact of 'Umar, **most of** them adopted **from Byzantine-Christian anti-Jewish** legislation, **were** more **often than** not observed **in** the breach. **Such** irra-

**Jews'**, *Midstream* 23, no. 2 (February, 1977), pp. 26-37; *idem*, 'Maimonides and the Muslims', *ibid.* 25, no. 9 (November, 1979), pp. 16-22; Eliezer Whartman, 'Islam vs. the Jews, Zionism and Israel', *Newsview* (July 5, 1983), pp. 12-17.

Rutherford, New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1985.

New York: Harper and Row, 1984. The quotation at the end of this paragraph **is from** page 75.

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984.

Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1979. The present writer reviewed this book in the *Association for Jewish Studies Newsletter*, no. 28 (March, 1981), pp. 13-14.

tional conceptions as the association of the Jews with the Devil, a well-known feature of the medieval Christian attitude towards the Jew, had little place even in the popular Arab imagination. Blood libels - in Europe a by-product of the popular perception of the diabolical Jew - were absent during these centuries. Expulsions did not occur. And we hear practically nothing during this period about prosecution of Jewish converts to Islam for alleged unfaithfulness to the new religion.

If theology **did** not dispose Muslims to treat Jews better **than** they were treated in Christendom, what accounts for the relatively more favorable position of the Jews of the medieval Islamic world? The answer, as might be expected, is complex and nuanced, involving economic, political and social factors that interacted in history in ways that elude simple description. Moreover, the contrast is starker for Northern than for Southern Europe, where the persistence of **pre-Christian** Roman traditions **and** the older settlement **of** Jews, **bordering on indigenous** habitation, **seem** to have fostered a more tolerant and economically and socially more integrated environment. **What** we shall **have to** say, therefore, in what follows takes *Northern* Christendom as its point of comparison so that the contrast will be sharpened with more meaningful distinctions brought to bear on the discussion.

As is well known, Jews came to Europe during the early Middle Ages principally as international merchants. Christian rulers, particularly **the** Carolingian kings, encouraged Jewish traders to settle in their realms by **offering** them **favorable** conditions of residency **and commercial mobility**. **The Jews, indeed, fulfilled an** important function in this predominantly rural and agricultural setting. However, their economic role was simultaneously a cause of social resentment. As merchants, Jews found themselves **practitioners of** a marginal and despised profession. Continuing a **prejudice** characteristic of Roman society, early medieval Christendom held the trader in relatively low repute. Always on the move and lacking firm roots **in** any given locale, the merchant appeared quintessentially alien. This attitude was reinforced by Christian doctrines **about the 'just price' that placed commerce at the bottom end of** the scale of religiously acceptable walks of life. From the very outset, therefore, the identification - however exaggerated - of Jews with a despised occupation accentuated their own alien religious status within Christian society.

**This situation degenerated when, with the revival of urban life in eleventh-century** Europe, Christians began to enter commerce **on** a large scale. Formerly the despised, alien merchant in a backward rural environment, the Jewish merchant now became a resented commercial competitor. As commercial guilds developed, Jews were excluded from membership on account of their inability to take the required Christian oath of initiation. The result, well known **to** all, **is** that **Jews** who were involved in commerce gradual-

**ly** transferred their energies to usury. And other Jews **who** for various reasons were pressured out of productive occupations also found their only means of livelihood in making loans to Christians. Jewish banking complemented European economic expansion during the high Middle Ages, and, because Jewish profits from moneylending steadily filled and refilled royal treasuries in the **form** of tax revenues, secular rulers sanctioned **and gave** legal support to this enterprise.

If kings and emperors tolerated the Jews on account of their economic benefit to the royal treasury, in Christian society at large moneylending bred anti-Jewish contempt. Jewish usurers were universally hated. Hatred emanated both from the common folk, who were the Jews' **main** pawnbroking customers, and from elements of **the new** Christian bourgeoisie, who resented the royal **support** for Jewish usury. Dependence **upon** the Jewish moneylender created an improper inversion of the **well-defined** hierarchical relationship between Christianity and Judaism and intensified the degree of discomfort with the alien Jewish presence. These anti-Jewish sentiments were further reinforced by the Catholic church's vigorous campaign against the evil of usury beginning in the twelfth **century**. Although only sporadically **successful** in gaining the support of secular rulers, it **had** a devastating **effect** on Jewish economic well being wherever it fell upon receptive ears. In short, economic factors, intertwined with religious conceptions, played an ongoing **role** in molding the negative attitude towards the Jews in Europe of the Middle Ages and in creating the rigid boundaries that separated Jews and Christians from one another.

In Islam, by contrast, religious conceptions and economic realities combined to produce a different state of affairs. Unlike Christianity, Islam, influenced by the mercantile background of Muhammad's native city Mecca, **was born with** a positive attitude towards commerce. The example **of** Muhammad's own life, as **well** as statements **in the Qur'ān and** in other Islamic holy literature, lent strong support to the mercantile life. And, since many of the jurists in the early Islamic period were themselves merchants, Islamic law was shaped to **meet** the needs of a mercantile economy. On purely religious grounds, therefore, there was no basis in Islam for the kind of prejudicial attitude towards the Jewish merchant that existed from the outset in Christendom.

In addition to this fundamental distinction in economic 'theory', economic realities during the early Islamic centuries prevented the development of the competitive atmosphere that heightened anti-Jewish sentiment in the West during the period of urban-commercial **expansion**. The Islamic conquest, **with** its political unification of the entire Mediterranean and all of southwest Asia, set in motion an enormous commercial revolution and created unlimited economic opportunities. As a result, whereas in Europe the new Christian merchants of the high Middle Ages viewed the old

Jewish merchants as competitors to be displaced, in Islam Muslim merchants of the early centuries following the conquest saw the Jews as equal participants in a burgeoning imperial economy. Interdenominational cooperation was common, and commercial guilds excluding all but **co-confessors** of the dominant faith did not yet exist. Moreover, the Jews enjoyed extensive economic diversification. This made the Jews more 'like' their non-Jewish neighbors and reduced the level of hostility, which in Europe resulted in part from their economic marginality. Of equal importance, the **Jews** of Islam during this period (and **later on**, for that matter) were never restricted to moneylending, as were their coreligionists in Northern Europe by about the **twelfth** century. **Jews** and Muslims **borrowed** and lent from and to one another, and the sticky issue of usurious lending to gentiles that caused so much consternation and insecurity for Jews in medieval Europe, leading **rabbis** to inveigh against the practice, had virtually no counterpart either within or without the Jewish community of medieval Islam.

While economically the Jews of Islam experienced much more **freedom** and integration into gentile society than their brethren in Europe, legally their situation appears comparable, if not worse. Proponents of the counter-myth regularly point to the **humiliating** disabilities imposed upon the Jews (and Christians) in the Pact of 'Umar and kindred Islamic sources. These stipulations include prohibitions against building or repairing houses of worship, against holding public religious ceremonies, against bearing **arms** or riding anything but the least honorable mounts, against holding public office, as well as a poll tax (**jizya**) levied in humiliating fashion. It is often noted, too, that the infamous Jewish badge' introduced in Europe for the **first time** in the thirteenth century existed centuries earlier in the Pact of 'Umar stipulations requiring distinctive dress. The twin themes of segregation and humiliation that run through the Islamic sources seem to rival if not exceed the legal restrictions and pariah status imposed upon the Jews in the Christian West.

Historically, however, theory and practice diverged. Even some proponents of the **counter-myth** concede that by and large the **restrictions** of the **Pact of 'Umar** were very unevenly and sporadically enforced during the centuries under discussion here. The large number of synagogues that were built to accommodate the new Jewish communities of the expanding Islamic world, and the **frequent** reference in our sources to the reimposition of the Pact of 'Umar restrictions, testify to the relative ease with which **Jews** and Christians evaded the heavy hand of the law.

Moreover, in assessing the legal position of the **Jews** of Islam it **is** important to reassert that the basic terminology defining their legal status, the **dhimma** conveys the idea of 'protection', which the Pact of 'Umar explicitly guarantees the Jews and Christians (**dhimmīs**) in return for their recognition of the superiority of Islam. The **latest** publication espousing the **counter-myth of 'thirteen**

centuries of sufferings and humiliations' under Islam ~ Bat Ye'or's above mentioned **book** - creates a **grossly** misleading impression by characterizing every bleak aspect of the **Judeo-Islamic** experience as '**the dhimmi condition.**'

Equally important, any comparative analysis of the position of the Jews under medieval Islam and Christianity must take into account a fundamental political difference between the two societies. Medieval Christendom had two competing authority structures, the state **and** the church, which **were plagued by** endless conflict. Popes and secular rulers battled with words and sometimes with armies for supreme authority over the Christian masses, and **each** side vied for hegemony over the **Jews** as well. Kings and emperors claimed the prerogative to protect the Jews, whom some began **to** call 'serfs of the royal chamber'. Relegated **to** a special legal status, Jews became subject to all the advantages and disadvantages of unmediated dependence upon the secular ruler. When central authority was strong, Jews could generally count on royal or baronial protection. But this protection was accompanied by rapacious taxation that sorely threatened Jewish financial security. When central power was weak, or when the ruler was far away, popular hostility towards the Jews often spilled over, unchecked, into physical violence.

The Roman church, for its part, strove to achieve the universalist ideal of a Christendom ruled by direct apostolic successors to Peter. Beginning in the thirteenth century, it asserted the theological doctrine of the 'perpetual servitude' of the Jews. The church insisted that secular rulers eliminate **state-supported** Jewish usury and **segregate** Jews from their Christian neighbors. The tribulations which **afflicted** the **Jews** as a result of the Church's partial, and in the case of Jewish moneylending occasionally **greater-than-**expected success in enforcing its will in these matters - like the very fact of the Jews' tenuous direct dependence upon the **protection** of the kings and emperors of Europe - may be credited to their unenviable position as pawns in the battle between church and state in the Middle Ages.

The somewhat less precarious position of the **Jews** in the medieval Islamic world has much to do with the fundamentally different organization of political authority in Islam. Unlike Christendom, classical Islam, being an ecclesiastical polity, **knows** no **formal** division between church and state. The caliph embodies secular and religious leadership **in one** and **the** same person. Consequently, medieval Islam did not experience a **church-state** struggle, nor its untoward side effects on the Jewish minority. To be sure, Islamic rulers were not immune to the conservative sentiments of clerics who favored strict enforcement of the Pact of 'Umar and even the revocation of its protective guarantees when **dhimmis** violated its ordinances. Many instances of anti-Jewish and **anti-Christian** oppression can be traced directly to the intolerant voices of these

'*ulamā*'. Nonetheless, this was relatively rare during the first six centuries of Islam, when religious scholars had somewhat less influence in public affairs than they did later on. Moreover, as A.L. Udovitch has pointed out in an important essay,<sup>11</sup> in Islamic law the status of the Jews is nowhere treated as a separate issue. Rather, stipulations are incorporated subject by subject into the conventional categories of the classical Islamic law codes. This stands in sharp contrast to the isolation of Jewry law provisions in the law of medieval Christian states and is a reflection of the greater degree of integration of the Jew in medieval Muslim society. Also, by way of contrast, the Jews of Islam never became direct, legal dependents of the ruler; nor did the Pact of Umar link toleration of Jews to their economic utility, as was the case in Europe. These differences surely help explain why the expulsions of the Jews in the West were not duplicated in the medieval Islamic world.

Not only were there differences in the legal policies of Christendom and Islam towards the Jews. The Jews held a disparate status within the social structure of the two societies as well. As noted above, the mercantile activities of the Jews accentuated their image in Christian Europe as a marginal group. Nonetheless, they experienced a considerable degree of security and prosperity, especially in the Carolingian kingdom. This was largely a consequence of the pluralistic structure of early medieval European civilization, which was still imperfectly Christianized and in which the Barbarian legal principle of the personality of law was still strong. In this heterogeneous environment, the Jews could be tolerated despite their own religious non-conformity and cultural and legal distinctiveness. By the eleventh century, however, the last remaining pagans of Western Europe had been converted to Christianity, leaving the Jews as the only non-Christian entity in society. The concomitant spread of the notion of a universalistic Catholicism, mediated to the masses by the monastic orders, also dealt a blow to the tolerance that was associated with the earlier, more pluralistic age. By the eleventh century, these and other transformations in Western Christendom, including the growing economic competition, set the stage for the anti-Jewish violence of the age of the Crusades.

The position of the Jew in medieval Near Eastern society stands in sharp contrast. The Jews were, first of all, indigenous inhabitants of the area, not, as in Western Christendom, immigrant aliens. In addition, pluralism and religious heterogeneity were more deeply and more permanently ingrained in Islamic than in European Christian society. A multiplicity of ethnic Muslim groups - Arabs,

<sup>11</sup> The Jews and Islam in the High Middle Ages: A Case of the Muslim View of Difference', in *Gli ebrei nell'alto medioevo* (Spoleto, 1980), II, pp. 682-683. This paper presents a balanced and well reasoned analysis of the subject. Some of the responses to the paper at the symposium at which it was given, which were published in the volume, betray what we have called here the counter-myth or 'neo-lachrymose' trend.



Turks, Berbers, and Iranians - populated the social landscape along with the Jews. As religious dissenters, moreover, Jews were not unique. They shared their *dhimmi* status with other non-Muslim groups, principally the Christians and Zoroastrians. As a result, Muslim religious discrimination was directed at the *dhimmi* class **as a whole, rather than at the Jews in particular. And while it is true that the Qur'an** and later Arabic literature occasionally distinguish between the two subordinate monotheistic religions, evincing a certain slight **preference for the Christians, it is also accurate to say** that contempt for non-believers in Islam was usually more or less evenly distributed across the *dhimmi* class. Moreover, when the restrictive clauses of **the** Pact of 'Umar were, on occasion, rigorously enforced, they were usually directed in the first instance at the far more numerous Christians. **For** all these reasons, therefore, the negative psychological impact of second-class status was substantially blunted for the Jews. To be sure, as in Christian Europe, the Jews were always and everywhere viewed by Muslims as social and religious inferiors. In practice, however, the Jews of Islam were less rigidly set off from the majority society than were the Jews of Christendom.

The permeability of boundaries between Jews and Muslims was fostered by yet another **distinguishing** characteristic of Islamic society - it **was far less corporate than** its European counterpart. In Islam there did not exist to the same extent the **more** or less rigidly defined identity (reinforced by royal concessions of legal autonomy) that Western corporate organization formally assigned to such groups as the nobility, merchant guilds, the clergy, municipalities, **and**, of course, the **Jews**. Rather, social agglutinates relied on informal **ties** of loyalty and group identity **that** by their very nature allowed for flexibility and an overlapping of roles and tended to mitigate the marginality to which official Islamic theology assigned the Jews. Though deprived of the right to bear arms and hence excluded from one of the most powerful groups in Muslim society, namely, the army, Jews participated in most of its other major social categories: the merchant class, the crafts, the government bureaucracy, **and even** the agricultural sector. Moreover, the absence of rigid corporate social organization in Islam meant that collective guilt for alleged crimes against the host society and its religion, so commonly assigned in Christendom to the Jewish corporate entity, did not become an operative motif in the Islamic-Jewish relationship. These realities were reinforced by the **persistence in Islam of the principle of the personality of law long after it** was replaced in Christendom by territorial and municipal legal codes that relegated the Jews to the position of a grudgingly **tolerated, separate and alien non-Christian corporate group**.

Economic, political, and social factors acted in Islam **as a counterweight** to the fundamental theological **hostility** towards the religion of Judaism - branded as an inferior version of monotheism -

and towards the Jews - stigmatized, along with the Christians, as contemptible infidels. However, even the theological **position** of Islam vis-a-vis the **Jews** differed significantly **from that** of Christianity. In Christendom, theological opposition to Judaism and the Jews was firmly rooted in the historical situation **attending the rise** of **the** new religion; it formed an organic and essential ingredient in Christian thought. **Born directly out of Judaism**, promulgated originally by professing Jews, and lacking an independent ethnic base, Christianity, from its inception, found itself locked **in** a bitter struggle to incorporate and then differentiate itself from its Jewish parent. Desperately needing to win converts from among the 'gentiles' in order to insure its existence, the early Church bitterly **resented Jewish** proselytizing among the Roman pagans, **not** to speak of Jewish resistance to the Christian mission. Moreover, until the fourth century the Roman government suspected the Christian community of messianic subversion and relentlessly persecuted the neophytes while continuing its ancient policy of recognizing the **legitimacy** of Judaism and protecting the Jews. In an effort to win its own recognition from pagan Rome and to justify its own sense of superiority, the nascent Church developed an elaborate **anti-Jewish** theological doctrine. This doctrine stated that since the **Jews had rejected Christ**, **God had rejected the Jews** and had chosen the Christians in their stead as the new Israel.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire, following the conversion of Emperor Constantine at the **beginning** of the fourth century, the theology of divine rejection was systematically employed to whittle **away at** the protective **provisions** of Roman Jewry law. At the same time, the spiritual Fathers of the Church, led by St. Augustine, developed a theological rationale **for** the continued presence of the Jews in Christian society. This was the well-known doctrine of 'witness', according to which **God** had preserved the **Jews as living** testimony, by virtue of their abject state, to the victory of Christianity. And, with **their** conversion to Christianity at the time of the Second Coming, they would bear witness to the truth of Jesus' Messianic essence. This official church doctrine provided a rationale for protecting the **Jews** and served to temper the theological animosity that informed the earliest phase of the **Judeo-Christian** relationship.

**In the Middle Ages, the heightened piety of the age of the** Crusades brought a **new**, popular brand of Christian **anti-Jewishness** to the fore. Its most ominous manifestation was the wholesale massacre of the Jews of the Rhineland in the Crusader pogroms of 1096. Popular mentality, partly to justify the violence, and **fed** by uneducated local clergy, embellished the official Catholic theology of rejection by fixating on the Jew as the ally of the devil, bent on destroying Christendom. The vulgar **anti-Jewish** theology of the high and later Middle Ages, with its frequent blood libels and **pogroms**, was paralleled by a **somewhat** more civilized, though **no** less

threatening, assault on the religion of Judaism, manifested in disputations designed to persuade Jews to convert to Christianity.

From statements in the Qur'an, the Prophetic traditions (the *hadith*), and other portions of its religious and secular literature, Islam appears similar to Christianity in its theological opposition to the Jews and Judaism. Moreover, while in Christendom, massacres of the Jews began relatively late in the history of the relationship of the two faiths, in Islam the very first encounter between Islam and Judaism produced a violent **anti-Jewish** pogrom. The Prophet Muhammad, having experienced ridicule and opposition from ~~the~~ Jews of Medina, lashed out violently by expelling some and massacring an entire Jewish tribe. However, that brutal anti-Jewish episode in the early **Judeo-Islamic** relationship turned out to have been - relatively speaking - an isolated one. This can be explained comparatively by the particular historical circumstances in which Islam originated and spread.

Unlike Christianity, Islam did not need to establish its identity at the expense of its Jewish parent. Islam was established on a solid ethnic foundation, the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula, who were swiftly won over to the new religion. Conquering within decades the rest of the Near Eastern and the North African world, Islam achieved virtually overnight what it had taken Christianity nearly three centuries to accomplish. There was even less reason, ~~therefore~~, to continue the aggressive struggle against Judaism, let alone devise a theology of divine rejection.

**In addition, because Muhammad was not a Messiah, Islam**, unlike Christianity, never conceived of itself as being a messianic fulfillment of Judaism. Rather, Islam saw itself **as** a restoration and purification of Abrahamic monotheism, which had become eroded in earlier divinely inspired religions, in Christianity more than in **Judaism. The Jewish rejection of Muhammad, therefore, never** entailed the same theological challenge to Islam that was implicit in the Jewish rejection of Jesus. Hence, Islam did not invest anywhere near ~~the~~ same polemical energies expended by Christendom to refute Judaism and to convert the Jews.

Characteristically, the Muslim attitude **towards Jewish** Scripture differed from that of its Christian counterpart. Christianity needed the Jewish Bible - ~~the~~ Old Testament, **in** its parlance - as witness to the incarnation and mission of Christ described in the New Testament. Islam viewed its Scripture differently, as a replacement of the divinely revealed, yet humanly distorted, Scriptures of both Judaism and Christianity. Muhammad, having personally rediscovered pure, Abrahamic monotheism through a new divine revelation, did not need the Jewish Bible for the justification of Islam. And indeed, the various attempts by medieval Muslim writers to **find** annunciations of the mission **of** Muhammad in biblical verses **pale** in significance when compared to the massive Christological exegesis of Jewish Scripture. Rabbinic exegesis of the Bible - so

repugnant to Christian theologians - bothered Muslim clerics only insofar as it distorted pristine Abrahamic monotheism. Thus the Islamic polemic against the rabbis was much less virulent **and** had far less serious repercussions. The Talmud was burned in Paris, not in Cairo or Baghdad.

More secure than their brethren in the Christian West, **the Jews** of Islam took a correspondingly more conciliatory view of their masters. In Europe, the Jews nurtured a pronounced hatred for **Christians, whom they considered to be** idolaters **subject to the** anti-pagan discriminatory provisions of the ancient Mishnah. Moreover, when faced with the choice between death and conversion, the **Jews** of Northern Europe usually chose martyrdom rather than 'the polluting waters of the baptismal font', as they called it in **Hebrew**. The **Jews** of Islam **had** a markedly **different** attitude towards the religion of their masters. Staunch Muslim opposition to polytheism convinced Jewish thinkers like Maimonides of Islam's unimpeachable monotheism. This essentially 'tolerant' Jewish **view** of Islam echoed Islam's own respect **for the Jewish** 'people of the Book' and doubtless constituted a factor - alongside the extensive interface in the economic and social spheres that tended to blur the boundaries between Jew and Muslim - disposing Jews faced **with persecution at the hands of Islam to convert rather than suffer** martyrdom.

Equally revealing of the contrast **are** the divergent Jewish perceptions of their own disabilities and suffering. The **Jews** of Christendom - hated, oppressed, and frequently physically attacked - poured out their grief **in** a long string of lachrymose dirges and chronicles that they incorporated into their liturgy. The **commemoration** of their suffering was branded on the collective Jewish consciousness and was the basis for the **so-called** 'lachrymose' interpretation of Jewish history in modern **Jewish** historiography. The Jews of Islam, at least in the period under discussion, largely refrained from such exercises of literary woe. The event that evoked Jewish responses most closely approximating the European writings was the terrible persecution, massacre, and forced conversion of Jews and Christians in mid-twelfth-century Spain and North Africa under the **Almohades**. These include the mournful phrases at the end of the chronicle of rabbinic history by the **twelfth-century** Spanish Jewish philosopher, Abraham ibn **Daud**, the doleful Hebrew poem of Abraham ibn Ezra on the destruction of Jewish communities in North Africa, and the litany of cruel suffering by Judah ben Joseph ibn 'Aqnin. (Very like the Northern European dirges in tone, this last passage, found in ibn 'Aqnin's philosophical treatise, '**Therapy** of the Soul', has been reproduced for the first **time in** an English translation in the anthology section of Bat **Ye'or's** *The Dhimmi*.) These texts bear eloquent witness to the trauma experienced by Jews during those difficult times. **It is**, indeed, against the background of this unprecedented persecution

that Maimonides, himself a refugee from Almohade terror, wrote the lines quoted at the beginning of this essay.

Similarly, as Bernard Septimus has shown in a recent **article**,<sup>12</sup> it was apparently the Almohade persecution that gave rise to a new Jewish saying (a purposeful distortion of an ancient Midrashic utterance): 'Better (to live) **under** Edom [i.e., Christendom] than under **Ishmael** [i.e., Islam]'. **This claim that Christendom provided a** more secure home for the Jews than Islam, first made by refugees from Almohade persecution who had found a haven across the border in **the Christian kingdoms of Northern Spain**, has unknowingly been revived **in our own day in the writings of proponents of what I have** called here, alternatively, the 'counter-myth' of unrelenting **Islamic persecution of the Jews, or the 'neo-lachrymose'** interpretation of Jewish **history**.

Contemporaries of the Almohade persecution, like Maimonides, perceived that an era of relative security and cultural integration **was drawing to a close. Indeed, the later Islamic Middle Ages**, from the late twelfth or early thirteenth century on, saw - as even the architects of the myth of the interfaith Utopia acknowledged - a steady decline in **Jewish** fortunes. There **were** many causes for this reversal, and the process, with its remissions, especially under Ottoman rule in the sixteenth century - a period often called the second 'Golden Age' of Jewish life under Islam - is well described in the books by Bernard Lewis and Norman **Stillman** mentioned above. The extent to which one can speak of a deterioration in the situation of the **Jews** in later medieval Islam, similar to the position of the Jews in medieval Christendom; the degree to which one can apply the adjective 'lachrymose' to the life and history of the Jews of Islam in recent centuries; and the extent to which modern Arab anti-Semitism - modeled in the first instance largely upon Christian stereotypes imported **from the West and** now nurtured by indigenous Islamic theological hostility - has become an **unmoveable** impediment to peaceful rapprochement between Israel and her Arab neighbors, are all matters for further reflection.

Better under Edom than under **Ishmael**: The History of a Saying' (in Hebrew), *Zion* 47 (1982), pp. 103-111, with an English summary.

